

# Tenure Strategies

or

**How to survive the first six years of academic life**

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## Caveat

- From a recently tenured (Fall '95) faculty member's perspective
- My opinions, based on my experience at Wisconsin
- Some fields work differently from others
- Some universities work differently from others
  - especially smaller teaching colleges

## Outline

- Tenure process
- Tenure metrics
  - What are they looking for?
  - What really matters?
- General tenure strategies
  - The lone wolf
  - The random collaborator
  - The empire builder
  - The team builder
- What worked for me
- A few words of advice

## Tenure Process

- Department executive committee
  - Annual reappointment reviews
  - Mid-course evaluation (typically 3rd or 4th year)
  - Promotion and tenure review in sixth year
    - Based on dossier and external letters
- Divisional committee (advisory at Wisconsin)
- Dean
- University committee (not Wisconsin)
- Provost, President, Chancellor
- Regents

## Tenure Metrics

- Research ← Extremely important
- Teaching ← Moderately important
- Service ← Somewhat important
- Extension/Outreach ← Not important



Wisconsin's  
priorities

Find out priorities at your university and your department

## The Research Metric

**IMPACT!**

- Change the way people do things in your field
  - the way people think
  - the methods they use
  - directions of others future research
- Influence on relevant industry

## Measures of research impact

- Letters of evaluation
  - External reviewers
  - Generally senior members in your field
  - Need to identify **specific individual contributions**
- Number of **high-quality** publications
  - Journals
  - Highly-reviewed conferences
- Extramural funding
  - Sufficient to support research program
  - Evidence of fund-raising proficiency
  - Evidence of success in competitive peer-review process

Need to identify **your** specific individual contributions

## Service Metrics

- Editorships
- Program committees
- Panels
- Reviewing
- Consulting
- University/College/Department committees

Measure of respect by your peers



## Teaching Metrics

- Teaching evaluations  
question #8: “Would you recommend the instructor?”
- Teaching awards
- Teaching undergraduates
- Course development
- Supporting letters from students

My opinion: Can hurt you, but is unlikely to help much

## General Research Strategies

- The lone wolf
- The random collaborator
- The empire builder
- The team builder

## The Lone Wolf

- Performs research primarily by his/her self
  - Small single investigator grants
  - Works with small group of students/postdocs
- Pros
  - + Little difficulty identifying who made contributions
  - + Get all the credit
- Cons
  - Generally limited to smaller research topics/ideas
  - Little leverage; must do most work oneself
  - No feedback from senior/peer collaborators
  - Probably limited impact

## The Random Collaborator

- Sequentially collaborate with many different colleagues
  - Small single investigator grants
  - Small team of students/postdocs
- Pros
  - + Potential for significantly greater impact
  - + Leverage colleagues' expertise
  - + Substantial feedback from senior/peer collaborators
- Cons
  - Some difficulty distributing credit
  - Still limited to smaller scale research topics/ideas

## The Empire Builder

- Develop and head large research group
  - Larger single investigator grants
  - Large team of students/postdocs/research staff
- Pros
  - + Potential for significantly greater impact
  - + Leverage larger team
  - + Little difficulty distributing credit
- Cons
  - Tremendous amount of management work
  - Requires superior fund raising skills
  - Little feedback from senior/peer collaborators
  - Long startup time

## The Team Builder

- Develop collaborative research team
  - Multiple faculty investigators
  - Larger multi-investigator grants
  - Large team of students/postdocs/research staff
- Pros
  - + Potential for significantly greater impact
  - + Leverage expertise of collaborators
  - + Tackle larger research topics/ideas
- Cons
  - Significant management effort (but less than Empire Builder's)
  - Requires better than average fund raising skills
  - Some difficulty identifying individual contributions

## My Tenure Experience

- Came to UW in Winter of 1990
- Struggled for first several years
  - Tried the Random Collaborator model
  - One paper in first 2 years
- Switched to the Team Builder model in 1992-1993
  - Joined with two colleagues
  - Formed the “Wisconsin Wind Tunnel” project
  - Received significant funding from NSF and ARPA
  - Published 6 journal and 14 highly reviewed conference papers
  - Additional collaboration with companies and universities
- Granted tenure in Fall ‘95

## Issues in my Tenure Case

- Extensive collaboration
  - Most papers and both big grants were with two collaborators
  - I was most junior of the three

Worked hard to differentiate myself

- Limited teaching of undergraduates
  - Had only taught one undergraduate course



## Some Advice\*\*

- Pick “real” problems!
  - solve problems someone cares abouts
  - don’t invent a new field
- Strive for multi-investigator multi-disciplinary projects
  - makes it easier to solve real problems
- Match the strengths and weaknesses of your local environment
- Make sure that you are excited enough to work on it for 3-5 years

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\*. Adapted from David Patterson’s “How to have a Bad Career in Research/Academia”

## More Advice\*

- Get lots of feedback
  - Send papers out for “pre-review” to your peers
  - Have periodic external project reviews
    - WWT: 2 times per year, 2 days with external visitors
- Work on Technology Transfer
  - Sell your wares in the Marketplace of Ideas
  - Give plenty of talks at universities and companies
  - Get to know, and impress, the big names in your field
- Host department colloquium in your fifth year
  - Invite likely letter writers
- Take the “Tenure Tour”
  - Give talks at likely letter writers’ universities your fifth year

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\*. Adapted from Mary Jane Irwin’s “The Tenure Process”

## Conclusion

- Goal is to have impact:  
Change way people do research in your field
- Do “real stuff”
  - Make sure you are solving problems someone cares about
- Feedback is key
  - Seek out and value critics
- Don't be afraid to change course mid-stream
  - Better to adapt than to be wrong
- Differentiate your contributions
  - But not at the expense of having high impact
- Have fun
  - This is what you will be doing for the rest of your life